

The 7 Churches – Smyrna & Pergamos

The Church of Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹ “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” ’

- Smyrna was a large, beautiful city. A center for learning and culture. It was a very rich city. There was a strong trade there due to the valley that ended in the harbor at the river Hermus.
- Smyrna was deeply religious and had many idols. This is the first city to demand worship of the Roman Emperor.
- The Roman Emperor Domitian (a.d. 81-96) was the first to demand worship under the title “Lord” from the people of the Roman Empire as a test of political loyalty. According to ancient church history, it was under the reign of Domitian that John was banished to the Island of Patmos where he received this vision. “Emperor worship had begun as spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome; but toward the end of the first century, in the days of Domitian, the final step was taken and Caesar worship became compulsory. Once a year the Roman citizen must burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar; and having done so, he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had performed his religious duty.” “All that the Christians had to do was to burn that pinch of incense, say, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ receive their certificate, and go away and worship as they pleased. But that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They would give no man the name of Lord; that name they would keep for Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. They would not even formally conform.” (Barclay)

- Jesus continues to allude to the name Yahweh with First and Last. Of course this speaks to His eternal character. But He is definitely declaring that He is God.
- He also reminds them that He died and came back to life. The theme of being dead and coming to life is prevalent throughout Revelation, but is also the major theme of the Gospel, not just Jesus, but all who give their lives to Him.
- Jesus has nothing negative to say about this church.
- I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich):
 - Works – In Ephesus, He knew their works, but then said nevertheless. There the works were not enough, nor were they impressive to Jesus. Here, Jesus acknowledges them and leaves it at that. Their works were being done with the right motives. Jesus is not against works, but He is very concerned with the heart, and why we are doing those works.
 - Tribulation and poverty - Smyrna was a prosperous city. Yet the Christians there were poor. “The word used for ‘poverty’ is the word for abject poverty. The Christians of Smyrna knew poverty because they were robbed and fired from jobs in persecution for the gospel. This kind of economic persecution was one important reason why Christians were poor in Smyrna.
 - Note that Jesus does not indicate rescue from this tribulation.
 - But you are rich – Jesus knows that they have treasure in Heaven. For us on earth, that may seem very distant and not helpful in our current situation. But it is true. And Jesus knows that eternity is far more important. Plus they are rich as they have everything in Christ.
 - Rich: This is what Jesus thought of them, and if Jesus considered them rich, then they were rich. Our estimation of ourselves is far less important than God’s estimation of us.

- In contrast, the Christians at Laodicea thought they were rich, but they were really poor (Revelation 3:17). Laodicea was a poor rich church. Smyrna was a rich poor church. Better to be a rich poor church than a poor rich church.
- The church at Smyrna was also **rich** in leadership. One of the pastors of that church was named Polycarp. He was one of the Apostle John's disciples and served at Smyrna until a.d. 155 when he died heroically as a martyr. He is considered one of the early church Theologians and fathers.
- I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. – There were those that claimed to be Jews, but also contributed to their persecution. They succumbed to worshipping idols, even if they lied to themselves that it didn't matter because they didn't believe. They pressured Christians to do the same.
- Do not fear – Jesus tells them two seemingly contradictory things – Do not fear, you are about to suffer. This could not seem like good news. They are already suffering. He then tells them that the devil will throw some of them into prison, and they will have tribulation for 10 days.
 - First of all, the persecution is from the devil. All evil that comes against us, no matter the form it takes is from the enemy. Not people.
 - Jesus indicated that this will be a test of their faith. God is saying that He is allowing the devil to do this. Through this, the church of Smyrna would be proven to be faithful and strong. Through the making of martyrs, His Kingdom will go forward.
 - How could they not fear in the face of this? By knowing 2 things: Jesus, and their future.
 - 10 days – a limited time of intense persecution where many were martyred.
 - Some think that Jesus really meant ten years of persecution. "As the days in this book are what is commonly called prophetic days, each answering to a year, the ten years of tribulation may

denote ten years of persecution; and this was precisely the duration of the persecution under Diocletian, during which all the Asiatic Churches were grievously afflicted.” (Clarke)

- Others think that Jesus really meant persecution over the reign of ten Roman Emperors. “
- Be faithful – Do not conform to the world to stave off persecution. I would say the same thing to everyone today. Never bow to the world. Even if it will lead to death. As it did with many Smyrnians
- I will give you the crown of life – Crown (stephanos) is a victor’s crown. Not a crown of royalty. Basically a trophy they get for all of eternity and to display in Heaven. This is also referred to as a martyr’s crown.
- He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. – The second death is Hell. The lake of fire. But those that overcome – overcome fear and do not reject God – They will never face true death.

Do we have such a strong belief in our eternal destiny. A strong faith in who we are as spirit beings. Such a belief in the promises of God that the hope of heaven and the salvation from hell is sufficient to give us strength to face death as martyrs?

Smyrna shows us that tribulation is not a measure of how spiritual we are. This church is doing everything right, yet they will face tribulation. Many will be martyred. Yet God is pleased with them.

How do we reconcile a God who loves us with a God who will allow the devil to persecute and even martyr us?

Jesus Himself was persecuted and martyred. That is the result of the evil in the world, but the goodness of God is that the ultimate rescue occurs when we depart this world and are taken to a place where there is no evil.

Pergamos

Revelation 2:12-17 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. ¹⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives *it*." '

- This was the political capital of the Roman Province of Asia the Less. When John wrote Revelation, Pergamos had been the capital city of the region for more than three hundred years.
- This city was especially known as a center for the worship of the deity known as Asclepios. Represented by a serpent, Asclepios was the god of healing and knowledge. There was a medical school at his temple in Pergamos. Because of the famous temple to the Roman god of healing, sick and diseased people from all over the Roman Empire flocked to Pergamos for relief.
- "Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple there were tame snakes. In the night the sufferer might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as it glided over the ground on which he lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was held to bring health and healing."
- Jesus introduces Himself
 - Jesus uses the imagery of the sword to introduce Himself. The Word of Jesus is powerful. In it is separation. Separation of truth

from lies, soul from spirit, carnal from spiritual. It is His Word that we must hold fast to.

- What they are praised for
 - I know your works – Jesus knows what they have been doing. While we often say that it is not about works, we know that how we behave reveals what we believe. Their works show what they believe.
 - Where they dwell, where Satan's throne is. Jesus knows that they are in a Satanic stronghold. The throne of Zeus was in this city. This city has been given over to demonic powers. Yet in the midst of this darkness sits this church.
 - They held fast to Jesus' Name and did not deny Him. Even in the midst of all this darkness, they stay faithful to Jesus. They won't deny Him even in the face of martyrdom. Antipas is almost anonymous. We know nothing about him except that he was martyred, but the church must have known him well.

- What Jesus has against them
 - They hold to the doctrine of Balaam
 - Balaam was a prototype of all corrupt teachers. According to Numbers 22-24 and 31, Balaam combined the sins of immorality and idolatry to please Balak, the king of Moab, because he could not curse Israel directly.
 - When Balaam counseled Balak, he taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel. The stumbling block was connected with idolatry (to eat things sacrificed to idols) and sexual immorality. If the church in Pergamos had those who did hold the doctrine of Balaam, it showed they tolerated those who practiced both idolatry and immorality.
 - Essentially the counsel of Balaam is to compromise. Don't hold to purity.

- They also held to the Nicolaitans beliefs – hypergrace, self-indulgence. the Nicolaitans also approved of immorality.
- Should churches remove people who embrace sin and refuse to repent of it? Or those who hold to and teach false doctrines?
- What do you think the world would think of a church like that?
- What Jesus wants them to do
 - Repent – 5 of the 7 churches will get the command to repent. Even those that have already come to Christ may have to repent again, if they have abandoned the Gospel and their love for God.
 - Or I will come and fight with the sword of my mouth – This is judgement. Jesus will measure them against His Word.
 - So does this mean that Christians, who are righteous, will have to face judgment?
 - **1 Peter 4:17** For the time [has come] for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if [it begins] with us first, what will [be] the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?
 - We are held accountable for idle words, our beliefs, how we spend our lives, what we treasure. Did we make it to the end faithful? These will not remove our salvation, but there are rewards in heaven for various things, and there are judgements of Christ that affect our lives here on earth.
- The reward for overcoming
 - Hidden manna – represents God's perfect provision. The true bread of life. Also represents the life of Christ.
 - **John 6:41** The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven."
 - White stone with new name – White stones were used for 2 things back then. Sometimes as an invitation to a formal

banquet. Sometimes as a sign of acquittal in court. It probably means both.

- This sounds like if they do not overcome this, they do not have the life of Christ or a seat at the banquet in heaven.
- So if one does not overcome, are they saved? Here, no. They are not. Those that are in this church simply do not believe. They think they do, but their doctrine is so messed up that they are not even saved. This call to repentance is dire. But if they repent, they will be saved just as much as anyone that has been living right all along.
- **Matthew 7:21-23** "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" ²³ And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"
- **Only those with true faith in Jesus are actually saved. Works do not save us. Being good does not save us. Saying a certain prayer does not save us.**
- **Ephesians 2:8-9** For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.
- And no. No one will know what the new name on it is or what it means until it happens.